Pro-CCP network 'Spamouflage' weaponizes Gaza conflict to spread anti-US sentiment

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For at least the past five years, a persistent online influence campaign linked to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to capitalise on world events to promote anti-American and pro-CCP narratives. In the months since the Israel-Hamas conflict began, the campaign has pivoted to incorporate the unfolding conflict into its broader narrative universe.

Commonly referred to as Spamouflage (https://graphika.com/posts/graphika-report-spamouflage), this years-long campaign has become infamous among researchers for both its sprawling size and its consistent failure to achieve any meaningful impact. In April 2023 the US Department of Justice unveiled charges (https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/34-officers-peoples-republic-china-national-police-charged-perpetrating-transnational) against 34 employees of the Chinese Ministry of Public Security for their participation in what is likely to be (https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/china-facebook-instagram-propaganda-campaign-1234813762/) the Spamouflage campaign. The individuals charged allegedly worked for a central taskforce based in Beijing, known as the 912 Special Project Working Group. From there, they were coordinating propaganda units around the country to pump out propaganda targeting US and international audiences using fake accounts on Western social media platforms.

At the end of August 2023, Meta removed (https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/29/technology/meta-china-influence-campaign.html) 7,704 Facebook accounts, 954 Facebook pages, 15 Facebook groups and 15 Instagram accounts linked to Spamouflage. This amounted to the largest ever single takedown on Meta platforms. It is not clear whether there were concurrent takedowns on X, previously known as Twitter, or on YouTube, both platforms on which Spamouflage is also very active (Google's Threat Analysis Group tracks Spamouflage under the name 'Dragonbridge' (https://www.theregister.com/2023/01/27/google_tag_dragonbridge_takedown/), but these are the same campaigns).

This enormous takedown meant that Spamouflage was still in a rebuilding phase on Facebook in October and November 2023. Spamouflage has been the target of mass takedowns across multiple platforms multiple times; these takedowns rarely if ever succeed in removing all of their accounts, or in preventing

them from reestablishing their presence.

After the August takedown on Facebook, Spamouflage appears to have fallen back on accounts which may have flown under Meta's radar, such as accounts which were active in early 2023 but not active in later months leading up to August. The campaign also began creating new accounts, for example a series of accounts using AI-generated women's faces as profile pictures.

Fig 1: Three Facebook accounts using AI-generated profile images, cross-sharing screenshots of real articles sharing negative news about the US. (https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/fig1.gif)

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As of October and November, there are still a number of Spamouflage accounts active on X. The narratives discussed in this Dispatch are therefore predominately drawn from Spamouflage accounts on X, with a smaller number of Facebook and YouTube accounts.

Some posts use real photographs, videos and screenshots of real news articles. Many others are accompanied by stylised images which appear to be wholly or partially AI-generated. These AI images do not appear to be intended to fool anyone into thinking they are real photographs; instead they seem to be intended as graphic illustrations of the key narratives.

The campaign's tactics are very consistent with its previous activity. It is continuing to use a very mixed set of accounts created at different times, many of which appear to be repurposed commercial bot accounts or potentially hijacked accounts. It uses a relatively smaller group of accounts to actually post content, and then a larger group of accounts which primarily just like, share and comment on the posts, likely in an attempt to amplify them. As is almost always the case with this campaign, however, its efforts appear to have generated little to no organic engagement from real users.

The key narratives which have emerged over October and November 2023 relating to the conflict in Gaza include:

The US is intentionally fuelling the conflict in Gaza for its own profit and/or political motives

This narrative echoes an earlier narrative (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-chinese-communist-party-twitter-network-mobilises-to-defend-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/) used by Spamouflage which similarly accused the US of deliberately prolonging the war in Ukraine by supplying weapons to the Ukrainians. The narrative hinges on the claims that US military aid to Israel is responsible for either creating or fuelling the conflict, to the benefit of US weapons manufacturers.

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8 November at 20:41
Canada's Global News reported that in response to the U.S. plan to transfer $320 million worth of precision bombs to Israel to "reduce civilian casualties," Gaza residents angrily said: "This war is being fought with the support of the United States!
US plans precision bombs transfer to Israel -source
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(https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/fig2-scaled.gif)

Figure 2: Examples of a YouTube video accusing the US of fuelling the conflict; a Facebook post sharing a screenshot of a real Reuters article about a plan to transfer precision bombs to Israel accompanied by text attributing the reporting to "Canada's Global News" (notably, not Reuters); two AI-generated illustrations posted to X portraying the US as an "arms dealer" and "war maker."

Palestinians are suffering, and the US is complicit in Israel’s actions

Some Spamouflage accounts have shared real pictures and videos which depict the suffering of civilians in Gaza, for example people fleeing from airstrikes or distressed Palestinian children. These are accompanied by other posts which assert that the US is either complicit in or responsible for Israel’s actions.

Fig 3: Two illustrations that appear to be AI-generated portraying the US as supporting Israel's violence against Palestinian civilians; an image posted to Facebook portraying Gaza as an "open air prison"; a Facebook post sharing an image of children in Gaza and referring to Gaza as a "children's cemetery"; an illustration posted to X referring to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, including supportive comments from other Spamouflage accounts.

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The US’s efforts to prop up its failing hegemony pose a threat to global stability

This narrative presents the US as an ageing hegemon which is engaging in conflicts around the world in a desperate and damaging attempt to preserve its dominance.

For example, the entire script of one 40-second YouTube video, read aloud by an automated male voice, says:

> “The hegemonic acts of the United States, such as waging wars and military interventions, have killed and maimed lives; trampled on human rights and the sovereignty of other countries, undermined the international peace and development; caused great suffering and disasters to the peoples of many countries; and are the greatest source of chaos threatening global security and stability, seriously impeding the progress of human civilisation.”

Figure 4: YouTube video promoting the narrative that the US is imperilling global stability in its attempts to retain hegemony.

Discussion

The narratives being promoted by Spamouflage on the conflict are broadly in line with previous narratives on the Russia's invasion and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Like narratives on Ukraine, they rarely delve into any detail on the complexities of the conflict itself. Instead, they focus solely on the role of the US in supposedly fuelling the conflict and instigating the suffering of civilians.

At this stage there appears to be little or no content referencing any role for China in the conflict, for example as a potential peacemaker.

Barring any major changes in the situation, it seems likely that the CCP's covert narratives on Gaza will continue to follow a similar trajectory as narratives on the war in Ukraine. This will likely include emphasising the cost to US taxpayers of providing military support to Israel, which will be contrasted with the domestic needs of people suffering from drugs, crime and gun violence in the US.

While the Gaza conflict features prominently, the focus of Spamouflage in recent weeks is clearly shifting towards the US's 2024 Presidential elections. In this context, the operation may start seeking to associate Biden specifically with costly US military entanglements (https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/07/technology/russia-disinformation-mike-tyson-priscilla-presley.html) overseas. Depending on how the position of the Republicans and of the likely Republican candidate Donald Trump evolves (https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/4331958-trump-mixed-messages-on-how-hed-handle-israel-hamas-war/), this could serve as a wedge issue which the CCP may seek to exploit.

An upcoming Dispatch will look more closely at the current Spamouflage narratives on Trump, Biden and the looming elections.

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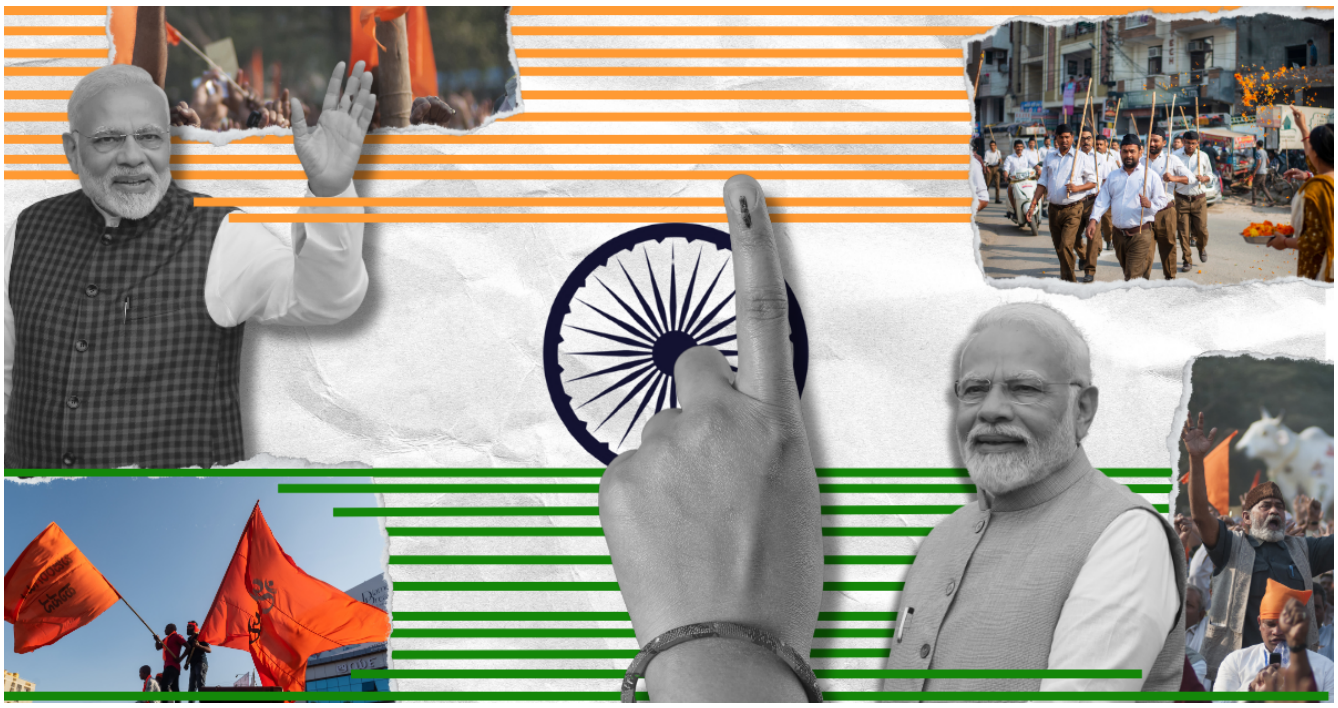

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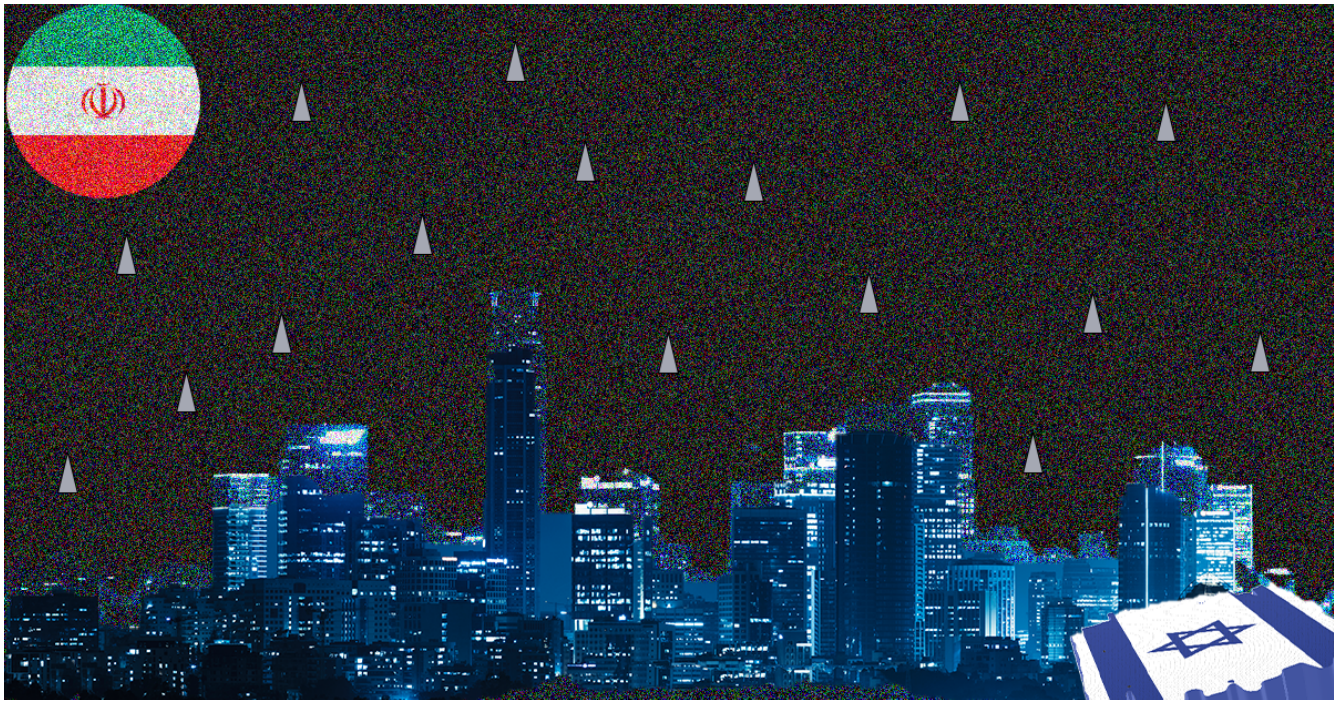
Hindu nationalists push conspiracy theories and misinformation ahead of elections (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/hindu-nationalists-push-conspiracy-theories-and-misinformation-ahead-of-elections/)

India's upcoming general elections are likely to hand the Hindu nationalist Bharata Janata Party (BJP) a third term in office. This Dispatch examines Hindutva's use of divisive rhetoric and conspiracy theories ahead of the election.



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Misleading and manipulated content goes viral on X in Middle East conflict (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/misleading-and-manipulated-content-goes-viral-on-x-twitter-in-middle-east-conflict-iran-israel-strikes/)

Within seven hours of Iranian drones being launched towards Israel, misleading content received over 37 million views on X.

(https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-ccp-spamouflage-campaign-experiments-with-

new-tactics-targeting-the-us/)

Pro-CCP Spamouflage campaign experiments with new tactics targeting the US (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-ccp-spamouflage-campaign-experiments-with-new-tactics-targeting-the-us/)

The pro-CCP network known as Spamouflage is a long-running and widespread but largely ineffective operation. However, there is evidence that the network is now experimenting with new ways to increase their influence.

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